

War-Ready Wheatley | A Lesson Plan (created by Dr. Tara A. Bynum, U of Iowa)

Lesson Overview:

This lesson will ask students to wonder at Phillis Wheatley Peters' living--as a writer and poet, an enslaved teenager and young woman, as a war refugee, or as a wife--during the War of Independence. The lesson has students explore and discuss the ways that Wheatley's creative writing and correspondence influences (and is influenced by) the political movements as they are transforming the American colonies and their European metropolises. The lesson assumes students will have read some of Wheatley Peters' letters and poetry and have a working knowledge of popular events during the War for Independence.

A Word of Context:

It's 1770. Phillis Wheatley is about 17 years old, and the infamous Boston Massacre has occurred not too far from the Wheatley family home. She's a teenager when protesters--in urban centers in New England in the South--gather to argue against England's taxes on the colonies. And, the greater Boston area is the site of various forms of conflict and state-sanctioned violence against protesters and "rioters" (today, we call them "Patriots"). Wheatley comes of her age during a revolution in ideas, culture, subjectivity, and citizenship, and she is writing poems in the midst of crises, civil unrest, and enslavement. Even though the violence of this conflict and soon-to-be war is ever present for Wheatley, her writings aren't often read as part of her revolutionary era context. Instead, she is remembered still as her frontispiece memorializes her--alone, fixed in time and with a quill pen in hand. She is remembered as the "first" black person to publish a book of poetry, the "first" in the makings of the African American literary tradition.

Wheatley isn't just a lone and enslaved woman. She isn't just a "first," either. She is, in fact, part of a larger community, society, and history--without which her writing makes little sense. Boston's famed poet publishes her first volume of poetry three years after the British occupation of Boston and three years before the colonies declare their independence. By February 1776, Wheatley is living in Providence (likely, with the help of her enslaver's son, Nathaniel Wheatley) because of the British occupation of Boston. Wheatley is a refugee of the American Revolution; she is part of a large exodus of women, men, and children who flee to safer, food-rich areas throughout the US, Canada, Caribbean, Europe, and West Africa; by 1779, Wheatley's friend, Obour Tanner will move from Newport, RI to Worcester, MA, about an hour west of Boston,

because she is also made a refugee. In light of Wheatley's flight to safer ground, we might read her as an activist or as an active part of a powerful and radical sociopolitical movement. It's a violent and revolutionary movement that makes a whole new country. It's also not unlike the sorts of activism and movement-inspiring action that we hope for in our present day.

Wheatley's life and writing invites us to consider the many ways her popularity--while enslaved and as a woman--shapes and disrupts her era's political and social discourse; because she is just as much a part of the founding of the U.S. as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson or James Madison.

Objectives: Students will...

- create a chronology of Wheatley Peters' life
- read and analyze the early American poetry of Phillis Wheatley in conjunction with several poems from Honoree Jeffers's 2020 book *The Age of Phillis* and learn just how cultural production shapes and influences political action.
- discuss the relevance of Wheatley and her poetry within our 21st century context.

Goals/Outcomes: By the end of this lesson, students should be able to...

- understand the importance of social, historical and political context when reading primary sources--because no one creates outside of the world in which we live.
- identify the value of comparative historical and literary analysis, with particular attention to social, cultural and political trends.
- analyze and observe how culture--in the form of art, poetry, music--is made out of and alongside political disagreement and civil unrest, in the past and at present.

Materials:

Wheatley's proposals for first and second volume of poetry

["Liberty and Peace"](#) (1784)

Select poems from *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773)

Select poems from Jeffers, *The Age of Phillis* (2020)

Reading/Engaging texts:

Activity #1: How do we remember? How does culture shape how we remember large and small events, eg. war, pandemics, terrorist activity, Coachella or an election or a birthday party?

1. See. Think. Wonder: Listen to and read Beyonce's "Black Parade" (2020). Imagine it's 2320, somewhere in what is today called the U.S. There's an

undergraduate course that's reading a "Black Parade" by Beyonce Knowles-Carter. Her poem is in an anthology of early 21st century U.S. writing. Her name is vaguely familiar to most in the class. Many have read her poems (they call them "poems" because they don't know Beyonce "sings" her poetry; her voice and how she uses it has been lost somewhere in time). They've read "Formation" before in high school. Some have even heard of an earlier work, "Single Ladies." Their task is to discuss this work, and they do. They mention Beyonce's husband and her children. They wonder about the meaning of the "parade," and someone suggests a connection between parading as "the traditional custom of a Thanksgiving day" and the former holiday's dining practices. They don't mention "black," and they aren't even curious about why Beyonce may have chosen to include it in the song's title. They also skim over the poem's use of the word, "pandemic," and no one says the names, George Floyd, Ahmad Arbery, or Breonna Taylor. When asked about the pandemic of the 2020s or its protests against police brutality, no one knows about any of it. And no one knows about the decades' movements for massive and federal police reforms.

2. Think. Given what these students of 2320 know (or don't know), imagine yourself--someone who's lived through these events and has been affected by these events--as the teacher of this course; assume you can bend and move through time. Explain what have they missed. Consider how would you explain this song to them? What does it mean within its historical context (remembering, of course, that you are living through it)?
3. Wonder. Return to the question that guides this assignment. How do we remember? How do these memories change with time? Is it easy to imagine a time when our historical moment (with its activism and its global pandemic) are no longer relevant or easily accessible?

Activity #2: Chronology | "When in the World is Phillis Wheatley":

Make a chronology of Wheatley Peters' life. Pay particular attention to the historical events that coincide with the important events in Wheatley Peters' life.

1. Expand the Wheatley Peters chronology provided (see below). Include more specificity where it's available.
2. Use available resources to create a timeline of the War for Independence--with an emphasis on a particular theme, geography, or political concern.
3. Bring together the Wheatley Peters and the War for Independence chronology. How do these chronologies help us better understand Wheatley Peters' writing?

Chronology

175x: Wheatley Peters is born in the Senegambia region of West Africa.

1761: Wheatley Peters is enslaved to the Wheatley family.

1767: Wheatley Peters publishes her first poem, "Messrs. Huffey and Coffin," in a newspaper.

1770-1783: American War for Independence.

1773: Wheatley Peters becomes the first person of African descent living in what would become the United States to publish a book of poems; *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* is published in England.

1778: Phillis Wheatley marries John Peters.

1779: Wheatley Peters publishes a proposal for a second volume of poetry, dedicated to Benjamin Franklin.

1784: Wheatley Peters publishes one of her last poems, "Liberty and Peace." She dies in Boston on December 5.

Reflection/Discussion Questions:

Do any of Wheatley Peters' poems speak directly to the civil unrest or the emerging war?

How might we read Wheatley Peters' poems differently when we pay attention to her life within its revolutionary era context?

Why is it important to consider context when reading? What happens when we don't include context? What gets lost?

Conversely, what happens when we focus too much on context? For example, if we only talk about civil unrest and the pandemic when reading Beyonce's "Black Parade" what might we miss? Put differently, if someone told your life story and only mentioned your activism and your historical moment's political conflicts and public health crises, what would they miss about your life? What would they misunderstand about your life?

Suggested Readings:

Declaration of Independence (US 1776).

Bassard, Katherine Clay. *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender and Community in Early African American Women's Writing*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999.

Carretta, Vincent. *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2011.

Waldstreicher, David. "The Wheatleyan Moment." *Early American Studies* 9.3 (2011): 522-51.

